



**IT ROARS BUT THEN IT SUFFERS:
AMERICA IN THE INTERBELLUM AS DEPICTED IN *THE GREAT GATSBY***

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Abstract

Francis Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* that is written in 1925 records one of the most remarkable decades in American history. American economy "roars" in the interbellum/interwar period with the advancement of technology and the stock market but then it declined by excessive consumerism. This article seeks to identify the changes in the American economy and consumer culture as depicted in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and the subsequent depression that happened. A new historicism technique is applied to describe some major factors enabling America in the twenties to lead the world's economy as depicted in the novel and factors ending the development. By using a content analysis technique, data in the form of excerpts from the novel are collected. The data are then analyzed following the thematic analysis principles. The result of the study points out some changes that made America in the twenties roar are the increase of middle-class people, the widespread use of technology, the development of the stock market, the affordability of automobiles, and the freedom to speak and act. The glorious decades came to an end after 1939 when the stock market crashed, consumerism escalated, credit card use expanded and banks got a "panic attack". The implication for today's lifestyle is mentioned.

Keywords: *The Great Gatsby, roaring twenties, stock market, consumerism, America, interbellum*

INTRODUCTION

Among the remarkable periods in the history of the United States of America (henceforward, America) is the twenties (1920s) marked by a leap in economic prosperity, the industrial revolution, distinctive music, and rebellious fashion (Wallace, 2012). Its position between the World War I and World War II made this decade even more emblematic. The machine has been intensively used by people to help them with their daily professional and personal activities from transporting goods, commuting to workplaces, traveling to the seaside, washing laundry to dusting the living room rugs (Guyton, 2020; Moore, 2015). Consequently, new jobs were created, the banking system strengthened, and the stock market ripened. Last but not least, jazz music was born and women flappers flourished as a manifestation of freedom in self-expression.

The Great Gatsby is one of the most canonical American novels of all time (Zeven & Dorst, 2021) written by one of the most prolific modern authors, Francis Scott Fitzgerald. The novel tells a love triangle story between Jay Gatsby, Daisy Buchanan, and Tom Buchanan in the setting of the historical decade so-called the "roaring twenties" a.k.a. 1920s. It "roared" metaphorically to describe its development in the economic, social, and cultural spheres. People live to the fullest as a celebration of freedom and financial prosperity in the aftermath of World War I. "The Great Gatsby" is claimed to be the best fictional work to illustrate the illusion of the American dream (Bayat et al., 2022). The dream that many people expect to happen in the land of opportunity. The dream that is possible to reach the

center of the world's economy. The dream that could be a mere illusion for those who could not retain from the temptation of consumerism.

The interest in reading and learning about the social construct in the twenties through the depiction in the novel never stops despite its age. After almost a century (92 years) from its first publication in 1925, the novel is still being reproduced in new types of paper and new designs of book covers. The Hollywood showbiz industry was successful to eye the potential of the novel for money capitalization by transforming the literary work into motion pictures (movies). There are five versions of "The Great Gatsby" adaptation into movies produced at different times: in 1926, 1949, 1974, and the most recent one, in 2013 starring Leonardo DiCaprio, Carey Mulligan, and Tobey Maguire (Hischak, 2014; Vooght, 2018).

The success of "The Great Gatsby" in depicting the roaring twenties has attracted attention from critics and academia. Myriad research has been done addressing both the love story and the lifestyle of the people living in that period with predominantly a decadent theme. Bayat, et al. (2022) see Gatsby's love for Daisy dragged him to the law of capitalism and rewarded him with the illusion of the American dream. His desire to win Daisy and her wealth was not fulfilled after his purchases of luxury to impress her (Bayat et al., 2022). Sujarwo, et al. (2022) highlight two hedonism types that occurred in the novel: hedonistic egoism was when Tom and Daisy left the mess to Gatsby and hedonistic utilitarianism is when Gatsby holds an extravagant party every night (Sujarwo et al., 2022). Meanwhile, Norris (2018) and Terzi (2021) take a closer look at the consumerism culture in the decade (Norris, 2018; Terzi, 2021). Norris (2018) presents the philosophical theme of the novel as deconstructing Gatsby's ability to stand in line with the aristocracy despite his origin in the working class. Gatsby's wealth is as authentic as those of the by-born aristocrats. Terzi (2021) views the consumerism culture happens as fuelled by the ease of Bank loans to purchase the spreading technology. Research investigating the advancement of the decade by comparing fiction and non-fiction is quite scarce. This article intends to shed some light on some major factors enabling the roaring twenties to come into being as depicted in the novel and how the decade ended from a new historicism perspective.

After World War I was declared to end in 1918 and the Spanish flu was to recover, America experienced an economic boom and socio-cultural dynamic (Goldberg, 1999; Mortlock, 2018) p.12 and p.5-9). It is mainly promoted by America's abundant natural resources such as oil, timber, coal, minerals, land, and iron. The industry was multiplied by the technology surge such as automobiles, airplanes, telephones, and electric home appliances that became accessible to people regardless the social status (Guyton, 2020; Murphy, 2018). In addition, the lifestyle of hedonism was an effect of the hype of the survivors of World War I and the Spanish flu wanting to live their life to the fullest while leaving the trauma behind (Licari, 2019; Sujarwo et al., 2022).

Unlike other decades in the history of America, this decade is very emblematic that it has many nicknames: The Roaring Twenties, the Jazz Age, and the New Era (Mortlock, 2018:1). There is no academic record identifying who first coined the nickname the "Roaring Twenties", researchers, such as (Clark, 2012; Newman, 2018; Terzi, 2021; Zeven & Dorst, 2021) mention the term merely as a nickname without actually pointing out the reason why using the lion-and-machine-associated word. Silverstein (2004) mentioned "the decade begins with a roar" and Mortlock (2018) said, "what made the twenties roar?" All give a metaphor to the decade as a waking beast resonating high sound. However, those mentions could not justify the first coin of the word. Meanwhile, the Jazz age was used by Fitzgerald in the short story compilation "Tales of the Jazz Age" to mark the decade with a flourishing new wave of music fanatics (Fitzgerald, 1922).

The Great Gatsby is claimed to be the best novel to describe American life in the 1920s (Bayat et al., 2022). The main character in the novel is Jay Gatsby who comes from the working class. He made his way to reach the American dream. Whereas Nick Carraway, the narrator of the story in the novel, is Gatsby's neighbor who receives an invitation to one of

Gatsby's lavish summer parties. They become close friends since then. Carraway helped Gatsby to get reconnected with his former lover, Daisy Buchanan who is married to Tom Buchanan (Fitzgerald, 1925). The love story is delivered in the setting of the economic boom of New York City, the extravagant lifestyle of its inhabitants, the scandalous love story, organized crime, and the economic breakdown marking the end of the roaring twenties (Norris, 2018; Ramón, 2016; Sujarwo et al., 2022).

METHOD

This qualitative study investigates the major factors of the 1920s development and how it ends from the perspective of New Historicism. Data in the forms of excerpts of description and quotations from the novel *The Great Gatsby* written by F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1925 and academic journals are collected through documentation. Following the principle of New Historicism analysis, the fictional data taken from the novel are juxtaposed with information taken from books and academic journals (non-fictional data) such as the rise of economic power, the changes in American lifestyle, and the beginning of the great depression.

The data are then analyzed by employing thematic analysis which focuses on finding the patterns of the data and subsequently presenting themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006). First, a manual related to the codes was developed. Data from the primary and secondary sources were summarized, coded, and gathered into several initial themes. Then, the coded data were connected to some identified themes. Stages two and three are iterative. Finally, the coded themes are corroborated (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

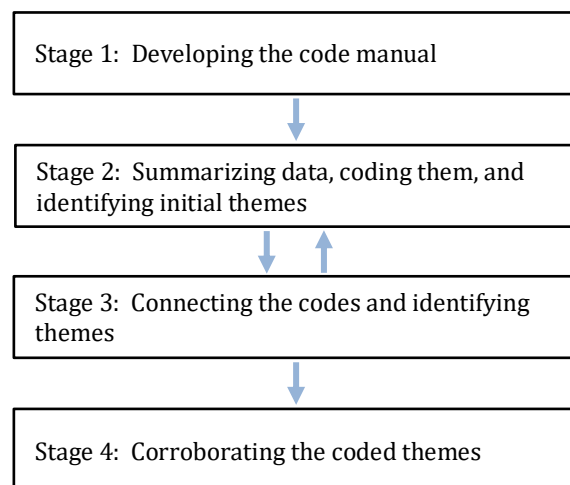


Figure 1. Coding stages adapted from Fereday & Muir-Cochrane (2006:84)

There are three themes formulated to guide the explanation of the findings. The first theme is the development of America in the 1920s in several aspects; the second theme is the factors contributing to the development of the decade; and the third theme is the causes for the developed decade to end.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

The twenties are claimed to be one of the most remarkable decades in the history of America. Although many important events happen to precede and follow it, this period of time remains emblematic arousing the interests of researchers and academia from time to time. Researchers are habituated to view the twenties as a decade of prosperity, controversy, greed, and isolationism (Palmer, 2006). Data describing the sociocultural and economic changes in America in the twenties are described thematically in the following table.

Table 1. Socio-cultural and economic change in the twenties

Theme	Subtheme	Code	Excerpts
America's economic development	Metaphors of the decade	"Roaring Twenties"	"some knowledge of the 'Roaring Twenties' ...is essential for understanding what Fitzgerald intended by Gatsby". (Newman, 2018:209) "The 'Roaring Twenties' was a decade of growing prosperity..." (Terzi, 2021:1)
	Migration	The more prosperous East	"I decided to go East and learn the bond business. Everybody I knew is in the bond business, ... All my aunts and uncle talked it over as if they were choosing a prep school for me." (Fitzgerald, 1925:3)
	Machines help human	Electric home appliance	"I'll telephone for a taxi to take you home, and while you're waiting you and Jordan better go in the kitchen and have them get you some supper..." (Fitzgerald, 1925:143) "I ran the car under its shed and sat for a while on an abandoned grass roller in the yard" (Fitzgerald, 1925:21)
Changes in the twenties	Social changes and their drivers	Automobile	"The interior was unprosperous and bare; the only car visible was the dust-covered wreck of a Ford which crouched in a dim corner" (Fitzgerald, 1925:25) "Gatsby knows that his gorgeous and melodic car establishes his status" (Fitzgerald, 1925).
		New industries	"There was a machine in the kitchen which could extract the juice of two hundred oranges in half an hour if a little button was pressed two hundred times by a butler's thumb." (Fitzgerald, 1925:45) "New kinds of entertainment appeared, like radio and movie" (Jiang, 2019:474)
	Changes in lifestyle	Mass production	Henry Ford mass-produced cars with running belts (Mccarter, 2011:)
		Freedom	"and a great number of girls dancing individualistically or relieving the orchestra for a moment of the burden..." (Fitzgerald, 1925:47) "Ladies and gentlemen,..... At the request of Mr. Gatsby we are going to play for you Mr. Vladimir Tostoff's latest work... The piece is known... as Vladimir Tostoff's 'Jazz History of the World.'" (Fitzgerald, 1925:58)
End of the Glory	Economy collapsed	Organized crime	"Who are you anyhow?" broke out Tom. "You're one of that bunch that hangs around with Meyer Wolfsheim – that much I happen to know. I've made a little investigation into your affairs and I'll carry it further tomorrow" (Fitzgerald, 1925:134)
		Wall Street crashed	"the stock market crashed in October 1929" (Belabed, 2018:64) "what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams..." (Fitzgerald, 1925:135)
		Hedonism	"I bought a dozen volumes on banking and credit and investment securities, and they stood on my shelf in red and gold like new money from the mint" (Fitzgerald, 1925:4).

Discussion

America's Economic Development

America was the first in modern times to reach economic prosperity. Authors such as Clark (2012), Newman (2018), Terzi (2021), Zeven & Dorst (2021), and Mortlock (2018) metaphorized America's condition with the great sound of a lion: the roaring twenties. In the twenties, America was the richest country per capita in the world and had the largest total GDP since the late 19th century. Meanwhile, Europe was still struggling from the devastation of World War I (Palmer, 2006; Soule, 1947). Big cities, especially New York, is the city where business grows intensively that attracts migrants from all over North America. It is illustrated in the novel that the East part of America blooms with business. Many Americans migrated eastward to pursue their American dreams.

In the twenties, American people enjoyed the practicality of life as machines began to help their daily work. Automobiles that used to be luxury vehicles were mass-produced turning it affordable commodities for the middle class. Domestic work was helped by home appliances such as telephones, grass rollers, vacuum cleaners, fridges, washing machines, and toasters. Life with the machines was illustrated several times in the novel.

Changes in America in the Twenties

After being exhausted by World War I from 1914 to 1918, America enforced an isolationism policy i.e. a policy of national isolation by abstention from alliances and other international political and economic relations (Johnstone, 2011; Nichols, 2013).

After the intended point of isolationism was achieved, America rebuilt alliances with the world, especially for economic exchange. The highest GDP per capita was attained, the world's stock exchange was centered on Wall Street and newly rich businessmen appeared. Americans managed to realize their American dreams gradually, they developed the agricultural potential, combined it with technology to produce abundant goods in a shorter time, decorated it with the flourishing popular culture, and commoditized all spheres of human life. There are at least three factors that made the multi-dimensional development in the twenties possible.

The Automobile

In October 1908, Ford Motor Company started mass producing the Ford Model T. This model was the first affordable automobile by middle-class Americans. What made it affordable is that Ford uses the assembly line where laborers do the same procedure and the parts are coming to them by using a running belt (Pearce, 2016; Price, 2004).

In the novel, Nick Carraway's sight was struck by a Ford car in a car repair garage when he followed his cousin-in-law, Tom. Nick's description of the car provides information that the unit was not a luxury good. "The interior was unprosperous and bare; the only car visible was the dust-covered wreck of a Ford which crouched in a dim corner" (Fitzgerald, 1925:25).

Pearce (2016) posits while Ford Model T is spreading among the middle class, the aristocrats demanded the production of luxury cars, not for mobility but for their status establishment. The Rolls-Royce Silver Ghost was then produced for them. It was traditional, the middle class rides Ford while the rich rides Rolls-Royce (Pearce, 2016). Gatsby rides Rolls-Royce to show his wealth. "Gatsby knows that his gorgeous and melodic car establishes his status" (Fitzgerald, 1925). To show that he is above the average, Gatsby let his luxury vehicles be used as a shuttle for anybody who wishes to join his party. "On weekends his Rolls-Royce became an omnibus, bearing parties to and from the city between nine in the morning and long past midnight." (Fitzgerald, 1925:39)

The Development of New Industries

The life of Americans in the twenties became very practical with the emergence of new technologies. The electricity that was not only used to illuminate houses and streets was a key factor in all the new home appliances to help people do their domestic work and

see them as enjoyable activities (Mortlock, 2018). Machines like vacuum cleaners, washing machines, fridges, and toasters were used by the middle class in America when they were still luxury in Europe (N. Moore et al., 2014; Olney, 2013). To welcome his guests to his daily lavish party, Gatsby ordered five crates of oranges. His butlers used a machine to extract the juice of the oranges.

Radio and motion pictures played a big part in the development of new industries since they sent information and spread lifestyle very rapidly (Jiang, 2019). Consequently, films, sports, and advertising emerged as other forms of industry. Both technologies are seen as revolutionary to American consumerism (Currell, 2009; Jiang, 2019).

New industries emerged as all daily life needs could be commoditized. People could afford everything easier as installment buying (buying by credit) was introduced by banks (Belabed, 2018; Little, 2015; Mock, 2014). "I bought a dozen volumes on banking and credit and investment securities, and they stood on my shelf in red and gold like new money from the mint" (Fitzgerald, 1925:4).

According to Little (2015), the color red is associated with living in risk and danger, including excessive debt. Many consumers at that time lived in red to fulfill their consumptive lust. Automobiles, electric home appliances, and flapper fashion are marks of prestigious ownership that could establish the status of the owners although in buying all of them they take installments (Little, 2015).

More Efficient Production Techniques

New techniques in manufacturing and industrial production emerged in the 1920s. This development which is called Industrial Revolution 2.0 changes the industry from men powered to machine-enhanced manpower and gave a great impact on society (Piacentini et al., 2021). For example, Henry Ford was inspired by the use of a conveyor belt in a slaughterhouse in Chicago where slaughtered pigs are moved to a group of butchers that will perform different parts of the butchery task. He copied the technique to mass-produce automobiles (Mccarter, 2011). Consequently, the price of the products was reduced and they became affordable for middle-class workers (Arnold, 2021).

Mass production was illustrated in the novel through Nick Caraways' amazement with how a machine could process a large quantity of product with less effort compared to human power.

With the invention of machines for mass production, the industry was boosted, products and goods multiplied, prices lowered, and the market widened. Consequently, the economy strengthened.

Changes in Lifestyle

Freedom was seen in many respects: the blatant sexual discussion was not seen as taboo anymore; the sound of jazz parties echoed in every corner of the cities; women wears flappers and danced Charleston as a rebellion against the status quo. People can afford any goods by paying installments (paying by credit).

The prohibition of producing and marketing alcoholic liquors and beverages made the twenties even more controversial for it caused the emergence of organized crimes by the mafia. In the novel, Gatsby was described as to get a major involvement with liquor bootleggers. The illegal liquor trade was one of Gatsby's main sources of wealth (Froehlic, 2011; Perez, 2019). This is illustrated in Tom's question demanding Gatsby to reveal his identity.

Mayer Wolfsheim and Arnold Rothstein are Gatsby's mentors in doing business in New York. Gatsby developed a strong brotherhood tie with both and all his action in building his American dream is under the suggestion of both (Froehlic, 2011). Manufacturing and trading intoxicating liquors are prohibited in 1919 per the 18th Amendment to the Constitution and by January 1920, taverns, bars, and saloons selling alcoholic beverages are closed (Froehlic, 2011; Perez, 2019).

End of Glory/Great Depression

The age of glory eventually ended up with what later is termed "the Great Depression". Initially, the decline of America's GDP started in August 1929 when the economy first went into an economic recession (Terzi, 2021; Wheelock, 2020). America survived two months until it worsened when Wall Street Crashed on October 29, 1929, called "the Black Tuesday", the effect of the decline was felt, business in the country was slowing, and the economy had stalled, causing bank panics and sending the U.S. into an economic downward dramatically (Belabed, 2018; Wheelock, 2020).

The Great Depression was reportedly caused by the consumer culture of the twenties itself when more and more people enjoyed shopping with credits but they did not have money to pay their debts (Belabed, 2018; Mock, 2014). With the support of bank loans, companies produced commodities on a high scale that did not sell and eventually troubled them in returning the loans. More and more people were selling their stocks rather than buying them. These create an imbalanced cash flow for the banks. Not only did the Great Depression turn America into a poor country, but the whole world also suffered from this economic crash as America was the bank of the world.

The Great Depression had not happened yet when *The Great Gatsby* was completed. Hence, there is no reference in the novel to the economic tragedy. However, the way Fitzgerald ended the Gatsby story in a sad ending foresaw that the Great Depression should eventually come if the attitudes of American consumers did not change.

Nick Caraway believed at the end of the story that "what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust floated in the wake of his dreams..." (Fitzgerald, 1925:135) was the source of the disaster. Gatsby's "extraordinary gift for hope, his romantic readiness and his heightened sensibility to the promises of life" American dream failed for the excessive consumption of materials provided by the American people (Fitzgerald, 1922:88).

The investigation of the development and end of the roaring twenties in fictional and non-fictional resources resulted in three themes, namely America's economic development, changes in the twenties, and the end of the glory. This theme grouping covers larger findings than those of Newman (2018) which focuses on the lifestyle of the elites of the twenties, Norris (2018) that pinpointed the consumer culture of the decade, and Zeven & Dorst (2021) which took a closer look at the characteristics of Daisy Buchanan. The finding of the current study attempts to provide a comprehensive description of life in the twenties and how it ended as described by Scot Fitzgerald in his novel.

American economic development was driven by the industrial revolution 2.0 when technology and mass production flourished in America. This finding is in sync with Murphy's (2018) finding as asserting that technological progress and industrialization enabled the American economy to outstand that of other countries. Piacentini et al. (2021) stated that electricity, automation, telephone, and television contributed greatly to the prosperity of American society. The banking system strengthened and New York became the center of the world economy. This echoes the finding of Sujarwo et al. (2022) and Scott (2021) who posited that the world was attracted to invest in the Wall Street and it was the credits (installment) that gave a drive for the money capitalization. However, the glorious decade was ended by the crash in Wall Street caused by uncontrolled consumerism. This detail gave support to the finding of Belabed (2018) and Wheelock (2020) who stated that the inability of the middle class to return the money caused instability in the stock exchange market, not only America suffered from this tragedy, the whole world was affected.

CONCLUSION

American life in the twenties brought both celebrations and conflicts. The achievements and life changes gained in this *interbellum* (interwar) period evoked the attention of scholars, anthropologists, authors, philosophers, and filmmakers to learn about it and spread information through their publications. Numerous social changes including industrialization, women's freedom, modern literature, mass culture, and technology

utilization are seen as one of the most remarkable developments America has ever had. The economic strength made America the center of the world's finance. More and more countries in the world became its client and benefitted from it. However, the horrific crash in the Wall Street stock market on the night of "Black Tuesday" turned everything upside down all of a sudden, and the glory was stopped. Not only did the life of Americans suffer from this "Great Depression", but those residing in the rest of the world also did. The prosperity of the twenties was short-lived but the social changes were lasting to these days.

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